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Research report

"She got more than me". Social comparison and the social context of eating

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ABSTRACT

Eating is a social activity for most people. Other people influence what and how much an individual chooses and eats. Such social influence on eating has long been recognized and studied, but we contend here that one important social influence factor, social comparison, has been largely overlooked by researchers. We review the literature on comparing oneself to others on eating and weight-related dimensions, which appears to have an effect not only on eating per se, but also on self-image, body dissatisfaction, and emotions. Social comparison processes may well underlie many of the social influence findings discussed in this special issue.

Introduction

Although much of the research investigating eating behavior examines the behavior of individuals eating alone in a lab, most actual eating outside of a laboratory setting involves people eating with other people, usually people whom they know (Rozin, 1996). Even when "meals" of only 50 calories (i.e., snacks) are included, most meals are eaten with at least one other person (de Castro & de Castro, 1989; Redd & de Castro, 1992). A US survey reported that only one third of people reported eating alone during the week and even fewer claimed to eat alone on the weekends (Rodrigues & Almeida, 1996).

Thus, human eating is generally a social activity. In fact, according to Sobal and Nelson (2003), "Eating alone is devalued and is not considered a 'real' meal for many people" and furthermore, "almost all people (who were surveyed) thought that an ideal meal should be eaten with the company of others" (p. 182). When Redd and de Castro (1992) asked people to eat their meals as they normally would with respect to eating companions, about two thirds of the meals were eaten with other people. Young adults report that they prefer to eat with others, although they do not always have time to do so (Larson, Nelson, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Hannan, 2009).

Eating with others

The presence of others has been shown to affect what and how much people order or serve themselves and what and how much they consume and thus exerts a powerful effect on their behavior; hence, the current special issue of *Appetite*. In their systematic review of eating and social influence, Herman, Roth, and Polivy (2003) identified three separate sub-literatures, all demonstrating that people eat differently in the company of others: social facilitation, impression management, and conformity or modeling.

Research on the social facilitation of eating shows that people eating with others generally eat more food than those eating alone (e.g., de Castro & de Castro, 1989). Additionally, it has been shown that the more people present, the more each eats (e.g., Hetherington, Anderson, Norton, & Newson, 2006), possibly because a meal with many eaters tends to have a longer duration (Pliner, Bell, Hirsch, & Kinchla, 2006). (See Herman's review in this issue.)

As for impression management, Mori, Chaiken, and Pliner (1987) demonstrated that when women are motivated to make a positive impression, they eat less than when they are not. And it is not simply the *quantity of food consumed* that is affected by impression-management concerns, but also the *type of food selected*. For example, women eating in a dyad with a male eat foods that are lower in calories than women eating with another woman, and women's caloric intake in general is negatively related to the number of men in the group (Young, Mizzau, Mai, Sirisegaram, & Wilson, 2009). It is assumed that what underlies this impression-management effect is women's desire to behave in accordance with social norms regarding appropriate levels of food intake so as to garner social approval. (See Vartanian's review in this issue. Vartanian also discusses impression management in men.)

In addition, there is a large literature showing that people tend to eat more or less depending on the amounts eaten by their eating companions (e.g., Herman et al., 2003; Robinson, Blisset, & Higgs,

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2013; Roth, Herman, Polivy, & Pliner, 2001). It is thus abundantly clear that what and how much individuals eat are strongly influenced by the people around them. (See Cruwys, Bevelander, and Hermans's review in this issue.)

In the present paper, we will focus on the effects on eating and other behaviors of another social process – namely, social comparison. Although it is rarely discussed, social comparison plays a more important role in eating than is ordinarily assumed. To begin, we contend that at least two of the other social influence processes described above ultimately stem from social comparisons. Both modeling and impression management imply an initial social comparison, with the individual comparing his/her own eating either to an existing abstract norm or ideal or to the actual current or previous behavior of some other individual(s). So, social comparison is a prerequisite for other forms of social influence to occur. However, there are also social comparison effects that cannot be neatly described as the precursors to modeling and impression management, and it is those effects that constitute our main focus in this paper. In either case, the basic tenets of social comparison theory, as described below, apply.

Social comparison and eating

Historically, social comparison was considered to be the outcome of a basic and ubiquitous human drive to evaluate the correctness of one's opinions and the "goodness" of one's abilities (Festinger, 1954). The study of social comparison soon expanded to include the evaluation of other personal qualities and behaviors, including emotions (Schachter, 1959). Social comparison theory posits that in the absence of concrete, physical standards against which to measure these characteristics, people rely on comparison of their own characteristics with those of other people (Festinger, 1954). The earliest studies generated situations in which the "need" for self-evaluation was aroused, often by providing the individual with ambiguous feedback about his or her standing on some valued characteristic. These studies focused on the question of with whom (which person or group) the individual chose to compare. Subsequent research, including much recent work, created situations in which a comparison was foisted on an individual and examined the behavioral and affective outcomes of such comparisons. Although Festinger (1954) emphasized that accurate evaluation required comparing oneself with a similar other, he also acknowledged that comparisons could occur with better-off or superior others (upward comparisons) or with worse-off or inferior others (downward comparisons). In terms of the affective consequences of such upward or downward comparisons, the simplest view was that upward comparisons would result in negative feelings and decreased self-esteem whereas downward comparisons would result in positive feelings and enhanced self-esteem. Basically these are contrast effects in which, one's own standing appears worse than that of a superior other and better than that of an inferior other (e.g., Tesser, 1991).

It is now widely accepted that both upward and downward comparisons can produce both positive and negative effects (e.g., Buunk, Collins, Taylor, VanYperen, & Dakof, 1990). For example, Lockwood and Kunda (1997) note the often-positive effects on individuals of successful role models or "superstars." According to their analysis, superstars promote self-enhancement and inspiration provided that they are perceived as relevant to the self and, importantly, provided that achieving a comparable success seems attainable; however, they elicit self-deflation and discouragement when a comparable success seems unattainable. Thus, if a relevant superstar's achievements appear attainable, the individual assimilates to or literally feels similar to that superstar, making the individual feel better; however, if the achievements do not appear to be attainable, the contrast between that other and the self makes one feel worse. Examining downward rather than upward comparison, Wood, Taylor, and Lichtman (1985) found that some breast cancer patients found downward comparisons threatening, presumably because they instantiated the idea that things might well become worse for them. Similarly, Markus and Nurius (1986) talk about feared possible selves.

In this article, we examine social comparison in the context of eating. We identify two areas in which social comparison can occur in the context of eating and influence an individual. Specifically, we examine studies in which 1) social comparison occurs on a dimension related to eating (i.e., body weight) and, if food is available, affects eating, and 2) social comparison occurs in terms of amount of food eaten or supplied and affects other feelings and/or behaviors (which may include eating behavior).

Social comparison on dimensions related to eating or body weight

In this section, we will discuss what happens when one compares oneself to others on an eating- or weight-related dimension such as physique, and then is given an opportunity to eat. To understand this phenomenon, we will begin with a brief review of a voluminous literature on the effects of mass media exposure to thin images on body satisfaction and related variables. A meta-analysis by Groesz, Levine, and Murnen (2002) examined experimental studies that compared exposure to magazine or video images of thin models with control exposure to average or heavy models or to objects such as cars or houses, and assessed women's body satisfaction or self-rated attractiveness. Their main finding was that body image was significantly more negative after women viewed thin images than after they viewed control images (although a few studies found the opposite). Examining moderating variables, Groesz et al. (2002) found that younger women as well as women who had significant body image issues were more adversely affected by the media exposure. In discussing their findings, the authors noted that social comparison is a construct that has received insufficient attention in understanding these results.

A more recent meta-analysis by Myers and Crowther (2009) cast a broader net by examining both experimental and correlational studies and tested the hypothesis that social comparison with thin others, directly or as represented in media images, is associated with body dissatisfaction. While the correlational studies typically use self-report measures to assess social comparison, the experimental studies are more likely to simply assume that exposure to thin people (or their images) induces social comparison; however, a few experimental studies do ask participants to report whether they had made such comparisons. The overall effect size was .77 – quite a large effect size by Cohen's (1992) criterion. Examining moderator variables, Myers and Crowther (2009) found a larger effect size for studies that measured (vs. inferred) social comparison, for younger (vs. older) participants, and for women (vs. men).

Thus, social comparison is a construct that researchers have employed to understand the effects of exposure to thin images on individuals' body satisfaction. It seems that social comparison does occur and that the comparison is associated (in most cases) with negative effects on people's satisfaction with their bodies. If we assume that thin comparison others are considered to be superior others (as they would be according to the Duchess of Windsor's dictum that "one cannot be too thin. . ."), then individuals are showing contrast effects. That is, people are making upward comparisons, and from the perspective of the Lockwood–Kunda approach, the success of the comparison other is not seen as attainable. These two meta-analyses are relevant for our purposes because they provide background for the description of a much smaller set of studies assessing actual eating after exposure to thin images. If we assume that social comparison processes are engaged by such exposure, then any effect on eating could be considered to be a direct or indirect outcome of such comparison.